

THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ON BRAND IMAGE PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

International companies in today's business environment should be more conscious about cultural differences and consumer behaviour to remain competitive. Although the goal of international firms is to display the same image of global brands across different cultures, the image of those names may still be recognized differently because of the different cultural values. The purpose of this article is to find out if and how the image of one global brand can be different from one culture to another. It also will pay particular attention to examining how people from various nations and cultures see the image of favourite global brands. The study presents that a well-known global brand can have multiple definitions for people in different countries. In fact, culture can influence in brand image perception. Consequently, the study provides valuable insights for manufacturers and marketers who attempt to sell their brands in different countries. Correctly, it highlights the importance of adapting communication strategies and movements by the cultural specifics in the target market.

Keywords: Culture, Branding, Brand, Marketing communications, Intercultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

An essential part of companies' marketing strategy is a brand. According to Cass and Grace (2005), brands are a valuable reference of information for the consumer and they are also an important marketing part for the manufacturers. Companies and marketers have used brands for distinguishing their products from those of other competitors and raising awareness of their consumers. On the other hand, brands can function as a signature of the manufacturer for consumers. Moreover, it can lead customers when making their decisions as well as it abstracts the information about a product's characteristics (Moore, Karl and Reid, Susan, 2008).

For firms and marketers to develop and maintain good brands, they need to know how to engage with consumers through powerful and efficient communications is crucial. According to Schlegelmilch (2016), communication or intercultural communication has a substantial role to play in marketing a brand name especially for companies doing business internationally. It described as the communicative

encounter between the people belonging to the different cultural background. It means that global brand names inevitably do not have to be seen similarly crossed cultures. Thus, companies and marketers need to consider cultural differences as a factor that influences how individuals see brands. According to Lustig and Koester (2010), despite the fact that global marketing strategies performed and brand identity described, the meaning that transmitted through a brand name cannot be represented precisely by the marketer; because people in different cultures may have different needs or demands. Therefore, an essential first movement to cover before performing any marketing plans is to discover what keeps the brand in consumers' minds. It gives a possibility to marketers to design communication strategies and activities according to the wants and tastes of the target consumers.

The present study will deal with assessing how the image of global brands are perceived by individuals in different national cultures and to what extent culture influences on branding? The study presents insights into the cultural factors that are crucial for international companies and marketers concerning devising useful marketing communications across cultures. It is necessary to take both marketer and consumer into account because branding is a form of interaction between them.

CULTURE

A culture can be assigned a meaning in multiple ways as stated by Samovar et al. (2015). However, according to the authors, anthropological literature gives a most common definition of the term. Ferraro (2015) indicated that culture is something which is human-made, hence it is transferable from one generation to the another through a proper communication medium (Mooij, 2005).

. Most definitions of culture usually focus on the content of culture. Zhenyi (2001) described a classic definition of culture. He defined, culture consists of patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups. The essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values.

Another way to describe the term of culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another that defines as a function of culture (Ferraro and Brody, 2015). Zhenyi (2001) argued that culture means shared symbols for convenient communication. From his point of view, cross-cultural communication is challenging in large part because of the lack of shared symbols. Thus, when we look at culture as a whole, one is focusing on the content of culture, and another one is stressing the function of it. Therefore, from the above discussion, it is quite evident that culture can be learned as it is transferable. There is a scope for the marketers to use intercultural communication to build a brand name in different cultures.

BRANDING: THE DEFINITION

Branding, as a type of marketing communication, has received considerable attention in recent years. Nevertheless, a few studies have concentrated on the impact of culture on international branding. Many studies have been done on global branding ethics, business regulation, and political factors. Building a brand is not a small task. Branding also plays a substantial role in developing a company's reputation and value. But to build a successful brand, marketers first need to know clearly what branding is. Branding is defined as a concept, which includes brand naming, packaging, advertising, and other sales promotion activities. Marketers often define branding as what we do for the brand, or to make the brand known and liked (Zhenyi, 2001).

BRAND

Kotler (1996) defines a brand based on the American Marketing Association definition (AMA) as a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them that intended to identify the goods and services of one seller and to differentiate them from those of competition. Another scholar describes a brand from the perspective of the user as the agreement of the packages of attributes that someone buys that provide satisfaction. He believes, rational or emotional, tangible or invisible, real or illusionary are some of the bright characteristics that make up a brand (Ambler, 1992). According to Keller (2003, p. 4) "a branded product can be a physical good as well as a service, a store, a person, a place, an organization or even an idea". From his point of view, the brand equity, brand associations, brand identity, country of origin and brand personality are important factors that determine the brand image (Keller, 1998).

Brand Image and Brand Associations

According to Aaker (1991), brand image is the consumer's perception and feeling about a brand that influences consumer behaviour. Thus, a brand is not just a product, because consumers link a variety of associations to the brand in mind. Brand associations define as anything attached in customer's mind about the brand such as the Nokia sound and Blue colour with Pepsi. In fact, Associations are not "reasons-to-buy" but provide differentiation that's not replicable (Aaker 1991).

Brand associations help marketers to understand how to use associations for extending brands, creating positive perceptions and opinions towards brands and suggesting attributes or advantages of using a particular brand (Low and Lamb, 2000). Keller (1998) expanded the model of brand image that indicates brand image results from the favourability, strength, uniqueness, and types of brand associations kept by the customer, as proved. He argues that the associations are made by marketing plans, or it can be created by the company itself or other commercial sources such as advertisements, name, logo, etc. The brand can also be associated with a company, a place, channel of distribution, event or even with the owners of

a brand such as Bill Gates and Microsoft. Keller (2009) lists brand associations into three divisions: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Brand attributes defined as unique characteristics that identify goods or services whereas benefits are described as a personal value and meaning that consumers depend to the product or service attributes, i.e., what consumers consider the product can do for them (Keller, 2009).

Brand Equity

Brand equity considered as an important phrase used in the marketing industry, which describes, the values that come from consumer perception of the brand image. A brand has positive customer-based brand equity when consumers respond favourably to it, that depends on a combination of recognition, associations, and judgments made by the consumer (Keller, 2009). Therefore, brand equity can be considered as a sign of brand success.

As the source of brand equity is customer perception, it is vital for managers to be able to measure and pursue it at the consumer level. According to Wood (2000), cultural differences create different levels of engagement with brands. for example, Muslim countries such as Turkey and Indonesia seem to be more open to globalize, while Brazil and India have strong local cultures and as changes occur, brands need to adapt Wood (2000), For the brands to strengthen their name equity and become relevant in various regions, they often need to prove flexible. For example, Tesco had to rethink its parking infrastructure in Asia, as most Asian customers use scooters instead of cars and change its Club card slogan to “We put our heart to serve you” in Thailand (Zhenyi, 2001).

Brand Identity

Brand identity is closely related to the perception of the company’s brand and following how the brand strategist or how the company wants to portray the right image of itself to the consumer. Aaker (1996) describes brand identity as a unique collection of brand associations that the brand strategist seeks to create or maintain. These associations express what the brand stands for and mention a commitment to customers from the organization members. From his viewpoint, a brand identity should present meaning purpose and direction for the brand. Consequently, brand identity is the primary motivation for brand equity.

Aaker (1996) developed a brand identity planning model to support businesses to assure the brand identity has depth and texture. Besides, the brand identity should help build a relationship between the brand and the customer by developing value proposition such as emotional, functional, and self-expressive factors. A survey of young consumers in China and the United States compared the brand identity of Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC). This study showed that the Chinese respondents were more apt to eat within KFC restaurants, and also had much more positive impressions of KFC than their US counterparts. It means that differences in cultural frames of reference lead consumers to actively localize

the brand identity of this nominally globalized product (Terrence H. Witkowski, Yulong Ma, Dan Zheng, 2003).

Country of Origin (COO)

One of the essential factors that influence customers' perception of a brand and its quality is the place where the brand is produced, referred to as country-of-origin (COO). According to Wang and Yang (2008), the role of country associations is very crucial in purchasing decisions. Research has shown that customers have certain perceptions of countries in their mind, which are based on different features such as the country's geography, history, art and music, famous citizens. Whereas some countries are fairly consistent across consumer nationalities; for example, the image of Korean products as cheap (Kotler, 2002). Other research studies also indicate that consumers in different countries respond differently to country-of-origin. For examples, people from Australia might like Chanel perfume which strongly linked to France, but they do not like French cameras or even French wine since Australia produces heavier wines (Wang and Yang, 2008). According to Koshate and Fisher (2012), people are more likely to use those brands from countries with familiar images, and they are also willing to pay less for those brands from countries with less favourable images. Studies have found that becoming linked to a specific country or region can also create disadvantages. According to Keller (2008), actions associated with the country may colour people's perceptions. For example, problems may arise if the company decides to move the production elsewhere.

Brand Personality

For consumer behaviour analysis regarding brand choices, personality has proved to be helpful as it focuses on how consumers think when it comes to brands, instead of what are the physical characteristics that they link with them (Aaker, 1996). Brand personality can be defined as a set of unique human characteristics associated around a brand name. A brand can be thought of being cheerful, young, feminine, intelligent, active and so on. Factors associated with the product that can have an impact on the perceptions around a brand personality could also be influenced by package, product category and price; non-product-related characteristics comprise factors like sponsorships, user imagery, celebrity endorsers, symbol, age, company image and country of origin (Aaker, 1996). In line with this, a consumer's perception around a brand's personality has a major role in defining the placement of a brand in the market.

National Culture

One of the essential elements of global marketing especially branding is understanding of cultural differences. It emphasizes that marketers must be conscious of the cultural meanings and feelings that people from different cultures may hold. Dake, (1991) defines, culture base on the meaning of marketing factors such as age, gender, language, nationality, work style, professional standing, and property,

influence the way an individual perceives the world. According to Dake (1991), culture is a learned set of human behaviour patterns and not given by nature. Therefore, it should also be brought into consideration when designing marketing activities.

BRANDING AS A MARKETING COMMUNICATION

Branding can be defined as a form of marketing communication where marketers add value towards perception of a service or a product. As per Keller (2009), consumers have a tendency to respond to branding that includes values.

Difference in the values of marketer and consumer could result in misunderstandings. For example, if an international brand name requires advertising in China, the company should apply specific strategies to grab the attention of consumers directed towards that particular cultural context. For instance, featured pictures that include the Great Wall, kites, Chinese dragons, or even Chinese idioms and proverbs need to be kept in mind. As per Tian and Borges (2011), marketing communications can be defined as an interactive communication that is two ways. Thus, the marketers gather, collect, interpret, and send the information to the markets for use. Although earlier models regarding the communication process specified the communication to be one way, it was stressed that having one-way communication could result in a loss of business.

Wilbur Schramm (in Varzandeh and Sorooshian, 2013) expanded the basic model of mass communication. He explains that communication is not complete until the sender (marketer) receives feedback from the recipient (consumer). Schramm's model defines communication as an active interaction in which both the sender and receiver are active in the message exchange. Consequently, the process of communication becomes two-way instead of linear by highlighting the value of feedback. (Varzandeh and Sorooshian, 2013). To create appropriate communication strategies in different markets, it is important that marketers understand the consumer needs and what is the expectations of a product.

In fact, obtaining feedback from customers builds opportunities for companies to succeed in the national and international marketplace. Consequently, marketing communications can be recognized as the voice of the company and its brands. Keller (2009, p. 141) describes marketing communications as “the means by which firms attempt to inform, convince and remind customers – directly or indirectly – about the products or brands they sell”. Therefore, for companies who attempt to sell and expand their brands internationally, it is essential to recognize factors such as culture, language, socioeconomic conditions, technological development levels, government regulations that are functioning as invisible barriers.

An issue that mostly appears with marketing communications is whether it should be standardized at the global or regional level, or should be adopted at the local level. However, many companies have a global-local strategy that means that they work with the global concept and local adaptations. International fast food restaurants such as Macdonald and KFC, use this strategy and have been customizing their menus for years as they offer different menus in different countries.

The gender segmentation is another important issue that marketers need to be aware of when creating marketing strategies. Gender segmentation is used to differentiate the needs of men and women due to the fact, they have different perception and evaluation of the product. According to Kim et al. (2006, p. 423), “gender has been and continues to be one of the most common forms of segmentation used by marketers in general and advertisers in particular”. Kim et al. (2006) found that males prefer brands which are convenient to them, whereas females prefer brands which can provide excitement. It means that it is a necessity to understand how gender differences influence purchase decisions in the particular market and create specific marketing strategies according to the different tastes and needs. For example, concerning car purchases, male consumers are targeted through technical aspects whereas women might be focused on the emotional elements, all depending on the wants and needs of the target market.

COMMUNICATION AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The term communication, as described by the author Jandt (2015), comes from the Latin word "communis" which refers to "common." It refers to the sharing of the information. It is an integral aspect of human behaviour, and every individual tends to communicate with others in their own possible way.

According to Okoro (2012), in today’s global business environment, it is mandatory for the marketing managers to equip themselves with intercultural communication skills. Managerial communication takes place in a management context to achieve strategic results for the organization. It is a proven fact that all the cultures do not necessarily demonstrate the same behaviours as ours, both in the verbal and non-verbal contexts. It is also essential to match the appropriate non-verbal gestures with the verbal communication so that messages are effectively and efficiently exchanged between the concerned parties as indicated by Alberts, Nakayama, and Martin (2015). To be able to interact with people from different cultures effectively, a marketing manager should consider certain issues before initiating communications with them. These issues, as highlighted by Jandt (2015) would be: Setting objectives for communication, adopting an appropriate style of communication, choosing and motivating the target audiences, setting a strategy for message development and message delivery, overcoming language difficulties, complementing verbal messages with the appropriate non-verbal cues.

Intercultural Communication Elements

Various researchers found that the language, education, and religion are the intercultural communication elements that influence the brand choice among consumers (Hill, 2011 & Kim, 2006). Penbek, Yurdakul Şahin and Cerit (2012) conducted a study on 200 university students and discovered that education is a crucial element influencing the intercultural communication interaction of a consumer with the brand. Another survey carried by Hofstede (2001) concluded that religion plays a significant role in building a value system of any individual and the use of religion as an intercultural communication element can help marketers make a brand name in the market. A study conveyed by Arnold et al. (2015) highlighted

that the choice of language largely determines the spread of marketing strategy among consumers. The researchers concluded that the marketers should aim to use, a local language in case of a product catering to local consumer needs only, whereas a global language such as English, in case the product is catering to the needs of global consumers (Hill, 2004).

DISCUSSION

This aim of this research is to examine how a global brand's image is perceived by people from different cultures globally and how does a brand behave when internationalising it. This paper would be beneficial for foreign companies that are seeking to enhance their understanding regarding different cultures to launch and promote their brand's name abroad more effectively. The study provides considerable implications for global companies that are making an effort to market and promote their brands in international countries. It also highlights the significance of seeking information as well as understanding the target customers' needs and wants, and this also involves differentiating similarities and contrasts between women and men. When marketers are able to understand the cultural significance regarding what the brand can produce, it opens up prospects to enhance their marketing programs further designed around the consumer's culture as well as build political executions focussing on the needs of each market. It is clear that additional studies are needed to evaluate the perception for a brand image with regards to various nationals and cultures. Besides, it would be useful to consider a survey that includes considerable number of brands.

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